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POETRY AND FREEDOM¹

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This is not an academic subject. It is intensely practical. Not from a vain or shallow thought do I mean to draw the inspiration of this address. Great is song used to great ends. The government has wisely ruled that the production of poetry is an essential industry. I am going to try to show some ways in which teachers of English can adapt their instruction to the present situation so that the teaching of poetry also may be recognized as an essential industry. I wish it to be said not only that the song that nerves a nation's heart is in itself a deed but also that next to the writer of a song is the man or the woman who teaches it aright.

I shall discuss first the historical relation of war and poetry; second, standard English poetry as produced or modified by war; third, the poetry of the present war; and, fourth, what we can and should do about it.

The Battle of Marathon was fought 490 B.C. and that of Salamis 480 B.C. Aeschylus (525-456) was wounded at Marathon and fought at Salamis; Sophocles (495-406) as a boy danced in the celebration that followed Salamis; and Euripides (480-406) was born on the day when that great contest was won for freedom.

¹President's address before the National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago, February 26, 1919.

Pindar lived 522-443. Julius Caesar freed Rome from the rule of the Roman aristocracy 48 B.C.; Virgil followed (70 B.C.-19 A.D.), Horace (65 B.C.-8 A.D.), Ovid (43 B.C.-17 A.D.). Dante (1265-1321 A.D.) lived in the midst of a fierce struggle for Florentine freedom. Crècy (1346) and Poitiers (1356) happened in the same generation with Chaucer (1340-1400). The Spanish Armada met its doom in 1588, and William Shakespeare lived 1564-1616. Napoleon kept Europe in a turmoil 1796-1815; Byron lived 1788-1824, Shelley 1792-1822, Keats 1795-1821, Wordsworth 1770-1850. Browning (1812-1889) and Tennyson (1809-1892) were also within the sphere of Napoleon's influence. Some irreconcilable Republican once said that he was not ready to assert that all Democrats are horse thieves, but that he was sure all horse thieves are Democrats. While I will not go so far as to say that all wars for liberty produce great poets, it does seem to be a fact that most great poets have been distilled in the cauldron of wars in which freedom's battles have been won.

What is the reason? Is it the stirring of the blood, the purification of the soul, the unshackling of the intellect, the destruction of artificial and conventional concepts? Whatever the cause may be, we have here a fact of great pedagogical importance. We have the opportunity, the privilege, and the duty of transferring the spiritual vigor caused by war to the souls of our pupils. Whether or not we succeed depends upon our ability to see visions and dream dreams. I wish to try briefly, simply, and humbly to make a few concrete suggestions, though they must of necessity be fragmentary.

Dr. Johnson says that literature has two functions—to make new things familiar and to make familiar things new. The teacher's task is not dissimilar. Let us discuss first some ways in which she can make familiar things new.

There is Chaucer's knight. Five hundred years ago he loved chivalrye, trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie, being in those respects at least 500 years in advance of the Germans of 1918. He had ridden in Christendom and in hethenesse, the latter being represented by Puce and Turkye, where he had gone agayn another hethen. The phrase *another hethen* has always

hitherto puzzled me; now I know he meant a Prussian. Nor must we forget the yong Squyer, who had been somtyme in Chivaachie, in Flaundres, in Artoys, and in Picardie. Henceforth those old words shall have a new meaning and Chaucer's verse a fresh significance. Forevermore to American ears those words are as full of meaning as Lexington and Yorktown. Thank God for Geoffrey Chaucer! And remember that, in the year of our Lord 1376, Geoffrey Chaucer, Englishman, shows us an England that had reached a degree of culture and gentility which today in certain European nations is still unintelligible.

Let us pass to Shakespeare. In Richard II, Act 2, Scene 1, is this passage, which henceforth to at least one American will mean as much as Yankee Doodle or Dixie:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-Paradise;
This fortress, built by Nature for herself
Against infestation and the hand of war;
This happy breed of men, this little world;
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall,
Or as a moat defensive to a house
Against the envy of less happier lands;
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
The land of such dear souls, this dear dear land.

This is a good passage to call, I think, to the attention of our children. So is this one from Henry V, Act III, Scene 1.

Once more unto the breach, dear friends,
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
Now set the teeth, and stretch the nostrils wide;
Hold hard the breath, and bend up every spirit
To his full height. On, on, you noble English,
Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!
Dishonor not your mothers.

Macbeth in the main is a terrible and strictly up-to-date picture of vaulting ambition that o'erleaps itself and falls on the other side. I say in the main, for the last four years have taught us that at least one sentence in the play is a lie:

Not in the legions
Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned
To top Macbeth.

To his grim idol. . . .
 Millions of spirits for his fault amerced
 Of heaven and from eternal splendors flung
 For his revolt.

Hindenburg follows:

Which when Beëlzebub perceived, than whom,
 Satan except, none higher sat, with grave
 Aspect he rose, and in his rising seemed
 A pillar of state: deep on his front engraven
 Deliberation sat and public care;
 And princely counsel in his face yet shone
 Majestic though in ruin.

Milton's description of hell surpasses any modern picture as
 a true description of invaded France and Belgium.

Huge affliction and dismay.

The dismal situation waste and wild;
 A dungeon horrible, on all sides round,
 As one great furnace, flamed; yet from those flames
 No light, but rather darkness visible
 Served only to discover sights of woe,
 Regions of sorrow, doleful shades.

A hill
 Torn from Pelorus or the shattered side
 Of thundering Aetna, whose combustible
 And fuelled entrails thence conceiving fire,
 Sublimed with mineral fury, aid the winds,
 And leave a sing'd bottom, all involved
 With stench and smoke.

And in Book IV we find the Kaiser in soliloquy:

Me miserable! Which way shall I fly
 Infinite wrath and infinite despair?
 Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell;
 And in the lowest deep a lower deep
 Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
 To which the hell I suffer seems a heaven.
 O then at last relent: is there no place
 Left for repentance, none for pardon left?

Though omitting much, there is one poem which we cannot
 at this time leave unmentioned. It is Collins' "Ode 1746."

How sleep the brave, who sink to rest
 By all their country's wishes blessed?
 When spring, with dewy fingers cold,
 Returns to deck their hallowed mould,
 She there shall dress a sweeter sod
 Than fancy's feet have ever trod.

By fairy hands their knell is rung;
 By forms unseen their dirge is sung;
 There Honour comes, a pilgrim gray,
 To bless the turf that wraps their clay,
 And Freedom shall a while repair,
 To dwell, a weeping hermit, there.

Burns died before the Napoleonic era had been revealed in its true character, but there are at least three of his poems which have at this time a fresh significance for the nations that have warred for freedom. The first is "Bannockburn":

Lay the proud usurpers low!
 Tyrants fall in every foe;
 Liberty's in every blow!
 Let us do or die!

The second is "Does Haughty Gaul Invasion Threat?" It contains at least one immortal quatrain:

The Nith shall run to Corsicon
 And Criffel sink in Solway
 Ere we permit a foreign foe
 On British ground to rally.

The third is his "Ode for General Washington's Birthday":

No Spartan tube, no Attic shell,
 No lyre Aeolian I awake;
 'Tis Liberty's bold note I swell;
 Thy harp, Columbia, let me take!
 See gathering thousands, while I sing,
 A broken chain exulting bring,
 And dash it in a tyrant's face
 And dare him to his very beard
 And tell him he no more is feared,
 No more the tyrant of Columbia's race.
 But come, ye sons of Liberty,
 Columbia's offspring, brave as free;
 In danger's hour still flaming in the van;
 Ye know, and dare maintain, the royalty of man!

It is not, however, until we come to the Napoleonic poets that we feel how close is the analogy between the past and present. By the Napoleonic poets I mean the poets of England who lived for twenty years in the dread of that vast tyrant, and who rejoiced as we rejoice in their emancipation from that terror. Byron and Wordsworth are full of passages that since 1914 have taken on a

new meaning, while in Coleridge, Scott, Campbell, Southey, and Shelley there are words on which the fires of France and Belgium throw a new and fearful light.

In 1914, while the Huns were sweeping over Belgium, for example, one often thought of Byron's description of Greece:

A thousand years scarce serve to form a state;
An hour may lay it in the dust.

—*Childe Harold*, II, 84

But at this there would rush into one's mind as a wholesome antidote those noble lines from "The Giaour":

For Freedom's battle, once begun,
Bequeathed from bleeding sire to son,
Though baffled oft is ever won.

And scarcely less were the power and the comfort of the line in "Marino Faliero," "They never fail who die in a great cause." Byron also describes in one tremendous line the Prussian,

A nation swollen with ignorance and pride;

in another the motives of the Prussian autocracy,

In hope to merit heaven by making earth a hell;

and in a third the answer of nature to the ruin wrought by man,

How that red rain has made the harvest grow!

He hates war and says

The drying up a single tear has more
Of honest fame than shedding seas of gore.

He also feels and voices a stern contempt for military fame:

Thrice happy he whose name has been well spelt
In the despatch; I knew a man whose loss
Was printed Grove, although his name was Grose.

He despises kings as heartily as an American:

But never mind! God save the king, and kings,
For if he don't I doubt if men will longer.

And he seems to rise upon the wings of prophecy in at least two passages. This is one:

And Moscow's walls were safe again
Until a day more dark and drear
And a more memorable year
Should give to slaughter and to shame
A mightier host and haughtier name,
A greater wreck, a deeper fall.

This is the other:

Yet, Freedom! yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder storm *against* the wind!

Of all these Napoleonic poets Wordsworth on this theme as on others is probably the most illuminating. He sees it steadily and sees it whole with a large charity and tolerance. In one stanza he described Rob Roy, the eagle, and the Kaiser:

The good old rule
Sufficeth them, the simple plan
That they should take who have the power
And they should keep who can.

As Burns could not hate even the devil Wordsworth cannot exactly hate Napoleon. In 1801 he wrote:

I grieved for Bonaparte, with a vain
And an unthinking grief. The tenderest mood
Of that man's mind—what can it be? What food
Fed his first hopes? What knowledge could he gain?

What more exact analysis of the soul of William Hohenzollern could one imagine? Of Toussaint L'Ouverture, Wordsworth writes words that apply with equal force to a million martyrs who, since 1914, in the great cause of human freedom have been ferried by the grimmest of all boatmen across the gloomiest of all rivers:

Thou hast left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There's not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man's unconquerable mind.

Could there be a finer epitaph for Edith Cavell?

When Napoleon overran Switzerland, as William overran Belgium, Wordsworth wrote of the former in words that apply with equal force to the latter:

Two voices are there; one is of the sea,
One of the mountains; each a mighty voice.
In both from age to age thou didst rejoice;
They were thy chosen music, Liberty!
There came a tyrant and with holy glee
Thou foughtst against him, but hast vainly striven.

This difference there is, however: Belgium has not vainly striven, nor shall British freedom die. As Wordsworth writes,

It is not to be thought of that the flood
Of British freedom, which, to the open sea
Of the world's praise, from dark antiquity
Hath flowed, with pomp of waters, unwithstood,
.
Should perish. . . . In our halls is hung
Armoury of the invincible knights of old.
We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
That Shakespeare spake, the faith and morals hold
Which Milton held.

Here was high courage, but in 1806, while England faced still greater disasters, he rose to a higher level:

Another year! Another deadly blow!
Another mighty empire overthrown!
And we are left or shall be left alone,
The last that dare to struggle with the foe.
'Tis well. From this day forward we shall know
That in ourselves our safety must be sought;
That by our own right hands it must be wrought.
That we must stand unpropped or be laid low,
O dastard, whom such foretaste doth not cheer!

There is much more in Wordsworth that demands quotation, but time forbids. It must be added, however, that, as Wordsworth in 1802 said,

Milton, thou shouldst be living at this hour,
England hath need of thee,

England from August, 1914, to November, 1918, might have said,

Wordsworth, thank God that thou art living now,
England hath need of thee,

for, whoever faltered, he remained steadfast in the belief that "not without hope we suffer and we mourn."

"King-deluded Germany" is one of Shelley's phrases. Cowper was a patriot and a democrat. "England, with all thy faults I love thee still, my country," he said; and also, "But war's a game which, were their subjects wise, kings would not play at."

In Campbell one finds several passages that mean more now than they did in 1914. For instance:

O bloodiest picture in the book of time,
Sarmatia fell, unwept, without a crime

Hope for a season bade the world farewell,
And Freedom shrieked—as Kosciusko fell.

Ye Mariners of England!
That guard our native seas;
Whose flag has braved, a thousand years,
The battle and the breeze!
Your glorious standard launch again
To match another foe!

The spirits of your fathers
Shall start from every wave,
For the deck it was their field of flame,
And Ocean was their grave.

Britannia needs no bulwarks,
No towers along the steep;
Her march is o'er the mountain waves;
Her home is on the deep.

The meteor flag of England
Shall yet terrific burn
Till danger's troubled night depart
And the star of peace return.

Coleridge wrote—and it is not his least title to our gratitude:

Bear witness for me, whereso'er ye be,
With what deep worship I have still adored
The spirit of divinest Liberty.

These lines are in his "Ode to France." The whole poem applies with almost equal force to Russia now.

And what, I said, though Blasphemy's loud scream
With that sweet music of deliverance strove!
Though all the fierce and drunken passions wove
A dance more wild than e'er was maniac's dream!
Ye storms, that round the dawning East assembled,
The Sun was rising, though ye hid his light.

To compare Napoleon even by implication with William Hohenzollern seems highly inappropriate, yet several poems that appeared about the time of the former's abdication may claim our attention at this time. Among these are two sonnets by Shelley entitled "Feelings of a Republican on the Fall of Bonaparte"; Sir Walter Scott's "The Field of Waterloo"; Wordsworth's "Ode 1814," "Sonnets Occasioned by the Battle of Waterloo," "Ode 1815," and "Ode The Morning of the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving, January 18, 1816"; and Byron's "Ode to Napoleon Bonaparte." All are worth reading in their entirety; the following passages to me are especially interesting:

I hated thee, fallen tyrant!

. I know

Too late, since thou and France are in the dust

That Virtue owns a more eternal foe
Than Force or Fraud: Old Custom, Legal Crime,
And bloody Faith, the foulest birth of Time.

—SHELLEY.

Stern tide of Time! through what mysterious change
Of hope and fear have our frail barks been driven.

—SCOTT.

But man is thy most awful instrument
In working out a pure intent.

—WORDSWORTH.

'Tis done—but yesterday a King!

And arm'd with Kings to strive—
And now thou art a nameless thing,
So abject—yet alive!

Is this the man of thousand thrones,
Who strew'd the earth with hostile bones,
And can he thus survive?

Since he, miscalled the Morning Star,
Nor man nor fiend has fallen so far.

.
The desolator desolate!

The victor overthrown!
The arbiter of others' fate
A suppliant for his own!

Is it some yet imperial hope
 That with such change can calmly cope?
 Or dread of death alone?
 To die a prince—or live a slave—
 Thy choice is most ignobly brave!

Where may the wearied eye repose,
 When gazing on the great,
 Where neither guilty glory glows
 Nor despicable state?
 Yes, one—the first, the last, the best,
 The Cincinnatus of the West,
 Whom envy dared not hate,
 Bequeath the name of Washington
 To make man blush there was but one!

—BYRON.

At least two of Tennyson's poems at this time deserve increased attention. In "England and America 1782" he says:

Strong mother of a Lion-line,
 Be proud of those strong sons of thine
 Who wrench'd their rights from thee!

"Hands All Round" henceforth deserves to be often in the minds of Americans. Here is one lesson for us:

That man's the best Cosmopolite
 Who loves his native country best.

That man's the true Conservative
 Who lops the mouldered branch away.

Gigantic daughter of the West,
 We drink to thee across the flood;
 We know thee most, we love thee best,
 For art thou not of British blood?
 Should war's mad blast again be blown
 Permit not thou the tyrant powers
 To fight thy mother here alone,
 But let thy broadsides roar with ours.
 O rise, our strong Atlantic sons,
 When war against our freedom springs;
 O speak to Europe through your guns;
 They can be understood by kings.

In the *Century Magazine*, for December, 1918, Nelson Collins prints a valuable article on "The Poet of the War." The poet meant is Swinburne. Using "Songs before Sunrise" as a foundation, Mr. Collins makes out an interesting case.

In the January, 1919, *Atlantic Monthly* there is an article called "The Remarkable Rightness of Rudyard Kipling" by Katharine Fuller Grould. The most striking idea in this paper is that in "The Truce of the Bear" Kipling rises on the wings of prophecy, as Germany has already learned and other nations may learn.

Horrible, hairy, human, with paws like hands in prayer,
Making his supplication rose Adam-zad the Bear!

Touched with pity and wonder I did not fire then—
I have looked no more on women, I have walked no more with men.
Nearer he tottered and nearer with paws like hands that pray—
From brow to jaw that steel-shod paw it ripped my face away.

Rouse him at noon in the bushes, follow and press him hard—
Not for his ragings and roarings flinch ye from Adam-zad.
But (pay, and I put back the bandage) this is the time to fear,
When he stands up like a tired man, tottering near and near

Over and over the story, ending as he began:
There is no truce with Adam-zad, the Bear that walks like a man.

Of the poets and poetry produced directly by the war I would gladly say and quote much. Time forbids. I must say, however, that some of these verses stick persistently in my memory. Among these are Kipling's "For All We Have and Are," John McRae's "In Flanders Fields," Robert Service's "Fleurette" and "Grand-père," Noyes' "Kilmeny," and Alan Seeger's "Rendez-vous." To make complete the application of that epigram of Dr. Johnson with which we started, one may add that by teaching these and other new poems we have an inspiring opportunity to make new things familiar.

Ernst Lissauer's "Hymn of Hate" is perhaps the most curious and interesting poem produced by the war, if poem it can be called that poesy has none. It is really not a hymn of hate at all but a hymn of fear and admiration, those two sentiments

being, I take it, the chief ingredients of the complex psychological state we call hatred. If it were worth translating, the task should be approached from this angle so as to bring out or at least suggest that more is said, not meant, than meets the eye. But Helen Gray Cone's fine hymn of "Love for England" is all the translation that we need, and this, I think, is well worth our attention.

I hope that somebody will attack me because I have said nothing about our American poets. There are two reasons why I have said nothing about our American poets. There are two reasons why I have omitted them. In the first place their sympathy with freedom can be taken for granted, and in the second there is so much to be said on the subject that it is useless to begin at this time. The whole field is too close and too obvious for discussion. In Whitman and Lowell alone there lie countless opportunities. Some Englishman ought to do with our poets what I have tried to do for theirs and thereby contribute his mite as I have sought to contribute mine to the world-wide union of the English-speaking peoples, for, truly conceived and rightly understood, their literature is all ours and ours is all theirs. And what enormous wealth each brings to the other! To paraphrase Iago:

But he that borrows from me my good books
Takes that which nowise doth impoverish me
And makes him rich indeed!

Let us therefore continue to drink deep at that fountain of spiritual refreshment which a certain great Englishman characterized three generations ago as a stronger tie than the bonds of consanguinity between the Mother Country and the great commonwealths of the Mississippi Valley.